

# Santeria in Federal Prisons

## Understanding a little-known religion

*Mark S. Hamm*

One early morning in 1980, two correctional officers were making a routine inspection of Cellhouse C of the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta, when they noticed a peculiar, putrid smell along the corridor. The smell was coming from the cell of one Antonio Garcia Perez,\* a Cuban refugee from that year's "Freedom Flotilla" who had been sent to the Atlanta Penitentiary for the crime of murder.

The officers were careful; they removed Garcia Perez and his Cuban cellmates from their living area and inspected the cell. The foul smell came from rancid butter stored in a dozen milk cartons under Garcia Perez's bed. A makeshift construction of about 50 empty cereal boxes stood in the corner of the cell, surrounded by cigar butts, coffee, rotten oranges, and rock candy. Pigeon feathers were spread all around the cell. Holy cards, ribbons, and candles added a further touch of confusion.

The officers could only think that they had interrupted "some kind of voodoo."

### **The Santeria religion and U.S. corrections**

More than 5,000 Cuban nationals are incarcerated in prisons and jails throughout the United States. Many of them, such as Antonio Garcia Perez, are devotees of the Caribbean religion known as Santeria (pronounced San-ter-ee-ah). Yet correctional staff who work with these Cubans often find themselves in the position of the two correctional officers: They don't know much about this complex form of worship.

\*A pseudonym.



Courtesy USP Leavenworth

This article explains the Santeria religion and its practice among incarcerated Cubans. The materials used here are gathered from historical sources and from interviews with and observations of Cuban inmates within the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Santeria began in the early 1800's when hundreds of thousands of men and women of the Yoruba people (the Yoruba area is now in the nations of Nigeria and Benin) were brought to the Caribbean as slaves to work in the island's booming sugar, mineral, and coffee industries (Bascom, 1950; Betto, 1987; Murphy, 1987; Veliz, 1968). During this period Cuba was a colony of Spain, and the Spanish treated the Yoruba slaves much as slaves were treated in the United States: They were forced to work long hours in the tropical climate; they were owned as property, poorly fed, and uneducated; and they were brutally punished and sexually exploited (see MacGaffey, 1962).

The Yoruba slaves were expected to "become Catholics" (Kennedy, 1984). But the Catholic influence was slow to take hold; it did not seem to offer the Yoruba salvation from the pitiless conditions of slavery (Bascom, 1950). Though outwardly accepting the symbols of Roman Catholicism, the Yoruba slaves began to reconstruct their religious lives by fusing the traditions remembered from their homeland with the folk piety of the Catholic churches of Spanish Cuba. This blend of ancient African ancestor reverence and European Catholicism became known by the Spanish word Santeria, or "the way of the saints" (Murphy, 1987:66); the devotees are called Santeros. Because Santeria was really one religion (African ancestor worship) concealed in another (Roman



Roman Catholic religious objects—such as icon cards (here, of Our Lady of Charity) and saints' medals—are commonly used in Santeria worship.

Catholicism), a tradition of secrecy emerged among the Yoruba in order to survive the oppression of slavery. Hence, little was known about Santeria beyond the stories and practices of living devotees.

In order to worship the Yoruba spirits, called *orishas*, under the guise of Catholicism, later generations began to construct elaborate systems of correspondence between the *orisha* spirits and Catholic saints. Despite the presence of Catholic symbols in Santeria rites, however, the Santeria religion has remained, to this day, an African way of worship.

Santeros believe that every person is given a destiny, or "road in life" (Murphy, 1987). Therefore, each person has the responsibility to understand his or her "road in life," and to grow and benefit from it rather than become the victim of it. In other words, Santeria is a religion of survival. The complete fulfillment of peoples' destinies (ulti-

mately, the escape from slavery and oppression) can be accomplished only through deep devotion to the *orishas*. This devotion, which promises both worldly success and heavenly wisdom, takes four principal forms: *divination*, *sacrifice*, *spiritual mediumship*, and *initiation* (Murphy, 1987).

### Divination

For the ordinary devotee, Santeria provides a means for resolving everyday problems; through the *orisha* spirits, the Santeros receive assistance in hexing and killing enemies, protecting themselves against physical and spiritual abuse, outwitting the law, attracting luck in financial matters, and getting and keeping lovers (Teish, 1985).

### Sacrifice

The divination can be achieved only by deepening the Santero's relationship with the *orishas*. The truest way for a devotee to develop this deep relationship is to share with the *orishas* the devotee's most important substance—food. That is, the divination can be accomplished only through sacrifice.

Each devotee has a particular *orisha* that is worshipped above all others. To determine which *orisha* should be followed as the primary spirit, the devotee takes the numbers from the month and day of his or her birth (their start on "the road of life") and adds them together. From this sum, one is subtracted. If the number is above 10, the first digit is taken away and matched to a corresponding spirit.

Each of the 10 *orisha* spirits (see the chart) has its number as well as a favorite group of foods, favorite colors, favorite animals and objects, and appropriate day of the week for worship. Each *orisha* also has a corresponding set of Catholic

The orisha spirits and the system of sacrifice										
Altar	Ellegua	Ochosi	Ogun	Orunmila	Oshun	Chango	Yemaya	Obatala	Oyas	Babalu aye
<b>Number</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<b>Favorite foods</b>	Corn, candy, fish, rum, water served in a white cup	Fish, rum, water served in a white cup	Roots, nuts, meat, berries, fish, rum	Plum, white wine, water	Ochin-chin, honey, oranges, cinnamon, pumpkins	Apples, yams, corn, peppers, bread, pineapple juice	Cornmeal, molasses, watermelons, pineapple juice, seawater	Pears, coconuts, blackeyed peas, chekete (white wine)	Eggplants, plums, grapes, red wine, beans	Fruit, rum, water
<b>Favorite colors</b>	Red, black	Brown, green	Green, black	Yellow, green	Yellow, green, gold	Red, white	Blue, white, crystal silver	White with silver or purple	Red, purple, brown, burnt orange	Purple
<b>Favorite animals and objects</b>	Roosters, opossums, mice, three stones, crooked sticks	—	Roosters, goats, dogs, machetes, all iron	—	Quails, parrots, vultures, gold, peacocks, bells, fans, mirrors, scallop shells	Horses, rams, turtles, wood, pheasants, double axes	Shorebirds, conch shells, cockroaches, gourd rattles	Owls, doves, snails, coconuts, elephants	Sheep, locusts, black horsehair switches, copper	—
<b>Day of week</b>	Monday	Tuesday	Tuesday	Thursday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Wednesday	Saturday
<b>Catholic Saints</b>	St. Michael, St. Peter, San Martine, El Nino de Atocha	St. San Norberto	St. Anthony, St. George, St. San Pedro	St. Francisco de Asis	Lady of Cariad del Cobre (Mother of Charity and Owner of Cuba)	Santa Barbara, St. Jerome	Lady of Regla (Star of the Sea, the Virgin de Regla)	Our Lady of Mercy	Lady of Candelaria, St. Theresa, St. Catherine	St. Lazaro
<b>Place in house</b>	Behind front door	—	Behind front door	Living room	Kitchen, bedroom	Fireplace, business desk	Bedroom, children's room, bathroom	Living room	Library, study	—

Sources: Teish, 1985: interviews with 23 Santeria devotees

saints. Because Santeria is African-based, it views spirituality as an integral part of everyday life, and its sacrifices are offered as household acts (instead of acts performed in a church, mosque, or synagogue). The sacrifices (along with pictures of the various saints) are placed on an altar and a candle is lit in honor of the saint. The altar also has an appropriate place for worship in the home.

When a Santeria devotee makes a sacrifice to the *orisha*, no one (not even another devotee) may touch the sacrificial offerings, nor may they touch the icon of the saint that corresponds with the *orisha*. However, the devotee may join in prayer to the *orisha* with other devotees in an "altar circle" (or the devotee may choose to worship alone) (Teish, 1985).

#### *Spiritual mediumship*

Although sacrifices are viewed as necessary for divination, offerings of

food and icons of Roman Catholic saints are regarded as empty unless they are accompanied by various rituals. Foremost among these rituals is the placing of stones (known as *piedras*) behind a curtain in the lower part of the altar. Without these stones, no Santeria shrine can exist. They are referred to as the "stones of the Saints," and are believed to have life; some stones can walk and grow, and others can have children (Bascom, 1950). These stones are precious to the Santeria devotee; the most powerful stones are said to have been brought from Africa to Cuba by the Yoruba slaves who concealed them in their stomachs by swallowing them.

The power of the stones is conceived as an invisible fluid whose force can be felt by the devotee. This invisible fluid, this power, protects the devotee and the members of his or her home. It is through this fluid or power that the saints (or "guardian angels") manifest their divination.

This miraculous power is given to the stones by treating them with two other essentials of the Santeria religion, blood and herbs, which is known as the *bautismo*, or baptism. Stones which have not been so baptized are called *judia*, Jewish, and are thought to be completely powerless (Murphy, 1987).

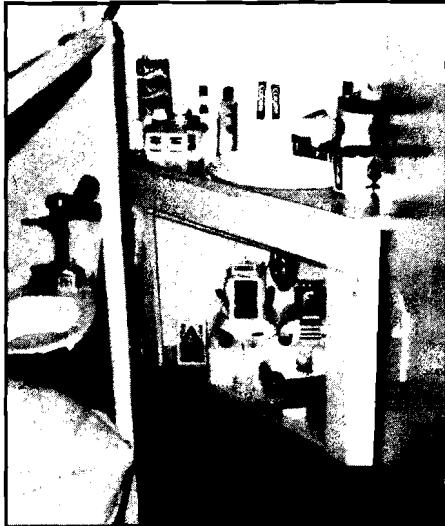
The blood used to baptize the stones must come from a sacrificial animal, such as a chicken, lamb, or pig. According to ritual rules, the slaughter must be performed by a devotee designated by others as the *matador*; the killing is to be done quickly and cleanly, and the flesh is to be cooked immediately and consumed by the congregation of devotees as part of the *bautismo* ritual. When the stones are baptized, the blood must be *caliente*, or warm, so that the invisible fluid within the stones may be brought to life. The warm blood must be allowed to flow over the stones during the *bautismo* (Bascom, 1950).

The stones must be baptized at least once a year to keep their power. After they have been treated with blood, a battery of drums is used by the devotees to call forth the *orishas* to join in dance and song. This celebration usually goes on for 3 nights, during which time spiritual possessions may occur. That is, if an *orisha* so chooses, he or she will descend and "seize the head" of a devotee. In this state, the *orisha* is thought to be incarnated in the devotee. As such, the incarnated *orisha* may perform spectacular dances and deliver messages and advice to individual devotees, thus bringing sacred knowledge to bear on the devotees' everyday problems.

During the celebrations, devotees view a large number of possessions of the worshippers as desirable—a sign that the spirits are well fed and satisfied—and the fluid and power of the stones are increased by the presence of the incarnated *orishas* (Murphy, 1987).

Whereas blood is viewed as the major elixir of the invisible fluid, the stones are also treated with herbs and kept safe by *resguardos*, protective charms, during the celebrations. Anthropologist Melville Herskovits (cited in Bascom, 1950:67) has written that "376 different kinds of leaves" are used as herbs. Before and after the *bautismo*, the stones are washed in a mixture containing the various herbs, water, blood, and herbs saved from previous years. As with the system of sacrifice displayed in the chart, each *orisha* has its own particular set of herbs and charms, its own type of stone, and a special animal from whom the blood must come for the *bautismo*.

Because Santeria devotees believe that each person has the responsibility to understand his or her "road in life," they



An altar located under the sink in an inmate's cell in the U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas.

believe that a knowledge of the properties and uses of herbs, charms, blood, and stones is every bit as important as knowledge about the system of sacrifice and the promise of divination.

#### **Initiation**

As the Santero grows in devotion, one particular *orisha* may begin to assert itself as the devotee's patron (Murphy, 1987). In other words, the sincere devotee will one day come to know his or her true identity. The profound love of this true *orisha* will then provide the devotee with his or her basic orientation throughout life.

When this *orisha* calls for it, the devotee will undergo a demanding initiation into the study of the patron *orisha*. An initiation ceremony, conducted in the home of an initiate of long experience, will call for a lengthy period of isolation and teaching. During this period, the *orisha* is "enthroned in the head" of the devotee and the devotee is reborn as the spiritual child of the blessed *orisha*.

#### **Santeria in U.S. prisons and jails**

In 1980, an estimated 125,000 Cubans left their homeland for a new life in the United States. The overwhelming majority of these refugees, known as "Marielitos," were law-abiding family members, students, government workers, and laborers. However, 350 refugees (less than .5 percent of the entire "Freedom Flotilla") were found by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service to have serious criminal backgrounds in Cuba, and were immediately transferred to the Federal Correctional Institution at Talladega, Alabama, to serve an indefinite period in prison (Chandler, 1987; Dolman, 1986; Sklar, 1984; U.S. Department of State, 1980). Between 1980 and 1987, about 7,600 "Freedom Flotilla" Cubans violated their conditions of parole in America; they too were incarcerated in State and Federal jails and prisons throughout the Nation (Burns, 1987).

Many of these incarcerated refugees were devotees of the Santeria religion. Deprived of their sacrificial foods, spiritual mediumship to the heavenly *orishas*, and the opportunity for initiation into the Santeria religion, these Cuban prisoners, like their Yoruba forebears, began to design elaborate improvisational rituals and customs to achieve divination in a hostile environment.

My study of incarcerated Santeria devotees took place over 8 months. The first phase lasted 4 months and was concerned only with unobtrusive observations of Santeria prisoners. During this phase, I was assisted by a correctional officer (a student of mine), who was assigned to work in the Cuban cellblock of a maximum security Federal penitentiary. The officer worked 40 hours per week in the Cuban cellblock; he took

notes on Santeria practices, and entered them into a journal. The officer also familiarized himself with the limited body of scholastic research on the Santeria religion. As such, his reflections were based on nearly 1,000 hours of observation, study, and scholastic mentoring.

The second phase included interviews with 23 devotees of the Santeria religion. All interviews were conducted in Spanish by either myself or the officer/criminology student. This phase of the research also lasted 4 months.

Our findings are reported in terms of the four primary aspects of Santeria: divination, sacrifice, spiritual mediumship, and initiation.

#### **Divination**

All 23 interviewees indicated that their worship was conducted to resolve their most immediate problem in life: imprisonment. That is, none of the devotees were seeking any kind of profound "spiritual awakening"; nor were they seeking to "hex or kill" their enemies, to protect themselves against abuse, to "outwit the law," or to attract luck in matters of finance and love. Rather, they were just trying to get by under what they thought were unfair and oppressive circumstances. Moreover, the devotees believed that their devotion to the *orishas* could get them out of prison and back to their difficult task of resettling in America.

#### **Sacrifice**

As indicated, the *orishas* are believed to be very hungry and very particular spirits. We observed 23 altars during the research and found that the altars alternatively shifted from the corner of the cell nearest the doorway to the windowsill of the cell. All the altars were built with discarded cereal boxes or



*Offerings placed on top of a locker in the U.S. Penitentiary, Atlanta, Georgia.*

books, and were usually covered with a white piece of cloth or a white t-shirt. Altars were not observed in any other areas of the cell. However, even if the altar was placed nearest the door, we also observed Catholic icon cards mounted on the glass of the windows.

All 23 altars displayed icons of Roman Catholic saints; icon cards often appeared in basketweave picture frames made from cigarette wrappers and colored paper. (These saints are the same ones that appear in the chart.) Seventeen devotees were tattooed with images of the various saints. Some of the tattoos were most dramatic. For example, three prisoners had the image of the Lady of Caridad del Cobre tattooed across the full length of their backs, and several others had the image of Saint Lazaro tattooed painstakingly from the shoulder to the hand.

All altars had some makeshift form of candle as well. We observed on seven occasions the phenomenon of devotees gathering together in altar circles.

Notably, four of these occasions happened on Sunday, when devotees of the *orisha* Obatala gathered together and chanted.

Apples, oranges, coffee, cigars, and pigeon feathers consistently appeared on the altars. The interview data revealed that these items were offerings to the saints.

#### **Spiritual mediumship**

Some form of rock candy was regularly present at 16 of the altars. The interviews revealed that the candy signified the "Stones of the Saints." We observed no other ritual connected to the elaborate system of spiritual mediumship.

#### **Initiation**

Likewise, we found that none of the devotees had advanced in the Santeria religion to the point where they had been "enthroned in the head" by a special *orisha*. That is, all of the devotees indicated that they had selected their *orisha* spirit through the mathematical process described earlier.

These findings can be summarized in a portrait of the "typical" imprisoned Santeria devotee—much like Antonio Garcia Perez. Garcia Perez was born in 1957 in the rugged Escambray Mountains of central Cuba. His parents were campesinos, or peasants, and had lived their lives as devotees of the Santeria religion. Although they worshiped the icons of Roman Catholic saints, they had never seen a Catholic priest in their lives (much less attended church); the legacy of secret devotion to the *orisha* spirits was instilled into the young Garcia Perez by his parents in the mountains of Cuba, where Roman Catholicism means something quite different than it does to Catholics in America.

Courtesy Chaplain Russell Mabry, USP Atlanta

Garcia Perez had been taken from a Cuban prison, placed aboard the "Freedom Flotilla," and sent to the U.S., where he was first confined in Talladega, and then sent to the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta as one of the institution's first of many dangerous "Marielitos." Garcia Perez's primary spirit was Oshun (see the chart). When the two correctional officers entered Garcia Perez's cell one morning in 1980, Garcia Perez was sacrificing all he could to Oshun.

He had no Ochin-chin (a plant indigenous to Cuba) to offer the *orisha*, and no honey, cinnamon, or pumpkins. He did, however, have half an orange. Garcia Perez placed the orange on an altar built from discarded cereal boxes, covered with one of his white t-shirts. He couldn't find a candle in the Atlanta Penitentiary, so Garcia Perez made his own out of a match and butter turned sour in discarded milk containers, which he kept under his bed. Garcia Perez had also ripped pieces of yellow and green from the top of one of his athletic socks, and placed these pieces of cloth on the altar. Because he had no access to quails, vultures, parrots, peacocks, gold, bells, fans, mirrors, or scallop shells, Garcia Perez offered pigeon feathers to his beloved *orisha*.

To make up for his meager offerings, Garcia Perez also placed a cup of cold coffee and a half-smoked cigar on the altar. In front of these items, Garcia Perez set a postcard image of the Lady of Caridad del Cobré. Behind the altar, Garcia Perez placed a piece of strawberry rock candy. His altar, set to the right side of the cell door, caused a strong, unpleasant odor.

## Implications for prison managers

The management of religions such as Santeria has always been a complex and difficult problem for correctional administrators. Granted that prisons have no right to attempt to influence what individuals believe, how do they deal with sincere religious practices that may undermine fundamentals of sound correctional management, such as sanitation? It is unquestionably ludicrous to envision animal sacrifices taking place in a correctional institution, and equally offbeat to imagine 3-day celebrations, spiritual possessions, and "infusions" of blood, herbs, and water being applied to the heads of incarcerated devotees. Yet it is pathetic to witness holy altars being constructed with discarded cereal boxes and inmates tattooing their entire torsos with images of Saints.

This article has attempted to provide some information for correctional workers who come into contact with a set of religious practices that might at first appear fundamentally alien. Historically speaking, the Santeria goal of day-by-day survival has been the central premise of the religion since Yoruba slaves fashioned it two centuries ago to survive the savage conditions of slavery. If devotees could undergo the brutality of slavery with increased hope, dignity, and human betterment (evidently they did, or the religion would have died immediately), then perhaps their belief system may also help them withstand their experience of confinement. Without that possibility of improving the conditions of their lives, life becomes meaningless—in essence, an absurd existence. ■

## References

Bascom, William R. (1950), "The Focus of Cuban Santeria." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 6:64-68.

Betto, Frei (1987), *Fidel and Religion*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Burns, Arnold I. (1987), U.S. Department of Justice Press Release (December 11).

Chandler, Kurt (1987), "Despite INS Parole Plan, Uncertainty Remains for State's Mariel Cubans." *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* (August 23).

Cosman, J.W. (1989), "Declaration of Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners." *The Journal of Correctional Education*, 40:56-59.

Dolman, Joe (1986), "Locking Up Liberty in the Atlanta Pen." *Southern Changes* (December).

MacGaffey, Wyatt (1962), *Cuba: Its People, Its Society, Its Culture*. New Haven, CT: HRAF Press.

Kennedy, Richard (1984), *The International Dictionary of Religion: A Profusely Illustrated Guide to the Beliefs of the World*. New York: Crossroads.

Murphy, Joseph M. (1987), "Santeria." In Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Volume 13. New York: Macmillan.

Sklar, Barry (1984), "Cuban Exodus 1980: The Context." In Irving Louis Horowitz (ed.), *Cuban Communism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

Teish, Luisah (1985), *Jambalaya*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

U.S. Department of State (1980), *Cuban Refugees*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office (June).

Veliz, Claudio (1968), *Latin America and the Caribbean: A Handbook*. New York: Praeger.